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ABSTRACT

Assessment is an important factor in any educational setting. This paper explores current assessment practices in the English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) setting. Because assessment is an essential component of the decisionmaking process in ESL, a case for a more dynamic process is presented. Assessment in the case of the ESL learner becomes a case of following the literacy growth of each student so that appropriate planning may take place. Assessment is a continuous process from entry to exit of the ESL program that monitors literacy development in addition to second language learning. In order to create a sociocultural, data-driven ESL classroom environment, assessment must honor the wholeness of language and focus first and foremost on the individual learner, using all the teacher's powers of observation and analysis. This is the only way to provide a comprehensive picture of unique individuals with unique needs. (Contains 26 references.) (KFT)

Title: Alternative, Dynamic Assessment for Second Language Learners

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ABSTRACT

Current assessment practices within the ESL setting are explored in an attempt to provide initial background. After a review of current literature, a case for a more dynamic, alternative process is presented. As a result of the dynamic process which sociocultural assessment allows for, a three-stage model for employing the procedure in the ESL classroom was offered. Implementation of the model may assist ESL teachers in developing programs and assessment practices that meet the needs of a culturally and linguistically diverse student population.

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Assessment procedures—recommended by the federal government—for limited English proficient (LEP) and English as a Second Language (ESL) students are based on the protection of rights provided by Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, in which:

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However, King (1994) points out that many misleading and inaccurate ideas regarding linguistically diverse learners have dominated educational thinking. Such inaccuracies have resulted in the continual judgment of students based on standards that make no sense to them; the attachment of "disadvantaged" and or "deficient" labels; and the creation of a situation in which students are considered inferior and expected to perform without the requisite linguistic and cultural knowledge needed to succeed. An examination of reform efforts focusing on student assessment indicates that outcomes are critical to instruction due to the effect that assessment has on the process of instruction. If taken into consideration, this point of view leads educators to believe that when assessment methods are directed toward skills and standards, then quality instruction is more likely to occur (Zehler, Hopstock, Fleischman, & Greniuk, 1994).

Darling-Hammond (1994) defines this as "consequential validity"—the positive impact of an assessment tool on the process of teaching and learning.

Current Practices in ESL Assessment

In the recent publication, Whose Judgment Counts?, Stefanakis (1998) delves further into the realm of assessing the ESL learner. An initial review of current literature reveals that in certain areas of the United States where the ESL student population is large the assessment process seems to be moving from a standardized approach to a more holistic procedure. To take a psychometric-only approach—similar to the traditional mode of assessing most English speaking students—seems inappropriate, limiting and outdated. Cummins (1991) stresses the need for educators to incorporate a child's language, culture, and shared assessment practices in order to fully understand where a student falls along the continuum of language learning. Although assessment is on the frontline in the education field, major reform efforts have thus far not succeeded in moving from a static assessment perspective to a more dynamic sociocultural perspective.

Current assessment practices, which involve large numbers of public school students across the country, are derived from the same behaviorist framework of instruction that has driven the American educational system for many years. The traditional psychometric model for assessing all students consists of a collection of standardized test instruments and techniques. Operating within this framework, compartmentalized assessments are based on the belief that students learn in small, prescribed sequences regardless of background, culture, disabilities, learning styles, or linguistic differences. In addition, this type of formal assessment—standardized, normed

evaluation—presupposes that students must meet an expected norm of educational performance (Miramontes, Nadeau, & Commings, 1997; Stefanakis, 1998).

Far from ideal and most likely out of necessity, many school systems across the country rely heavily on standardized tests to gain information needed in order to place language-minority students in available programs. With the wide range of tests available educators may select a particular test depending on the purpose for testing.

Due to the large number of available standardized tests, Ascher (1990) points out that there are five options commonly used in testing ESL students. These options and the suggested limitations (Figueroa, 1989) include:

1. nonverbal tests – although common procedure used with bilingual students, nonverbal measures of intelligence predict less reliably than verbal measures and may be hypersensitive to language background,
2. translated tests – while not difficult to translate a test, it is extremely difficult to translate psychometric properties from one language to another,
3. interpreters – this practice remains risky due to lack of research and little empirical validation of suggested procedures,
4. tests that are norm-referenced in the primary language – assessments should be capable of comparing performance on tasks across two languages, however no universal instruments currently exist for doing this in every domain,
5. assessments by bilingual psychologists – these assessments seem to rely heavily on standardized test scores in evaluating the ESL student.

Although widely used, Zimmerman, Steiner, and Pond (1993) suggest that standardized instruments must be interpreted with caution—especially in the case of

English normed tests administered to ESL students. Their research points out that Hispanic students typically score nine to ten standard points lower than the population for which the test was normed indicating that tests should be carefully selected with regard to purpose, normed sample, and population to be tested.

Orvando and Collier (1985) support this in saying that results from standardized tests should not be used as the determining factor in placement of ESL students because most of these tests have been normed on native speakers of English. Comparing ESL students to English-proficient students is not valid. Results from such tests will consistently underestimate the abilities of the non-native English speaker. Educational implications and concerns resulting from these issues stem from the fact that the process of assessment in the ESL setting focuses on identification for services, placement, language assessment, academic assessment, placement review, and exit from services. If inaccurate information is yielded from standardized test results, inadequate services may be provided or student needs may not be met at all.

In addition, Stefanakis (1998) suggests that if standardized tests must be employed, the following educational implications should be considered:

1. bilingual students take more time to complete tasks in their second language,
2. bilingual students may use a different reasoning strategy according to their native language system,
3. careful evaluation of native language proficiency must precede any assessment of learning potential, and

4. decision making related to bilingual students should be made from a collection of formal and informal assessment in both the native and second language.

Alternative, Dynamic Assessment Procedures

Assessment is an important factor in any educational setting. It has been established that in the ESL setting, assessment is an essential component of the decision-making process. Genesee and Hamayan (1994) point out that the focus on assessment in second language settings should be in contexts where that language is the primary language of education and of society at large. In addition, ESL learners need to develop proficiency in the second language at the same time that they are expanding and mastering knowledge and skills in academic and cognitive domains. Because the process of language learning begins at birth and continues, the rate of language learning is dependent on several factors—some intrinsic and some environmental.

The purpose of assessment with regard to the ESL learner becomes a case of following the literacy growth of each student so that appropriate planning may take place. Assessment, therefore, must be a continuous process—not a static process such as the process employed when utilizing a standardized testing program—that monitors literacy development in addition to second language learning (Antonacci, 1993). In order to fully understand this perspective, one must view assessment through the lens of the transactive process as outlined by Rosenblatt (1978). Transactive literacy development assumes that students construct meaning from print. In searching for meaning, the fluent reader uses text and his or her own experiences and background knowledge. If the text is poorly written, holds no interest to the reader, and is conceptually inappropriate, the fluent

reader appears to be incompetent. However, when the text is well structured, interests the reader, and is culturally and conceptually appropriate for the competent reader, he or she will demonstrate fluency. Therefore, a transactional view of reading and literacy demands settings, which enable teachers: a) to engage in "kidwatching," b) to be aware and sensitive to the linguistic competencies of the learner, and c) to employ a variety of assessment procedures.

In addition, Halliday (1975) suggests that language learning does not occur in a vacuum. Students need to engage in a wide range of language uses within a variety of situations. The exigency to assess students' language performance in various contexts is essential in determining their language development. This is a continuous and long-term process. How well a student scores on a test describes a form of product, not process. The following principles and convictions outlined by Antonacci (1993) form the rationale for employing a variety of assessment tools and procedures in the ESL classroom:

1. Assessment must be an ongoing process which begins the day a student enters a classroom,
2. The purpose of assessment must focus on planning and revising curriculum in order to meet the needs of the second language learner,
3. The teacher must become a researcher who observes students to determine their language strategies, interests, concepts, and cultures,
4. Two of the most powerful tools that the teacher-researcher must use are observation and analysis of performance samples,
5. Natural assessment is not haphazard, but rather systematic and is supported by careful field notes and documentation, and

6. Since language serves several functions, assessment needs to occur in many contexts.

Lozano-Rodriguez and Castellano (1999) suggest using a combination of both formal and informal assessment measures to assess academic and language ability of ESL students. Formal assessment may assist ESL teachers in determining how students are performing in comparison to other students across the country. However, matched with informal measures data can be used to support formal test findings or to provide documentation of student progress in instructional areas not typically covered by formal testing measures. The goal of assessment becomes more comprehensive in order to produce an accurate appraisal of the student's current level and mode of functioning within his or her cultural background and experience. The comprehensive assessment process involves not only the ESL teacher, but also the classroom teacher, parents, support staff, and administrators. Assessment guidelines begin with diagnostic decisions, analysis of assessment results, appraisal of student needs, defining and designing a program to meet the needs of the student, and ongoing monitoring in order to readjust instruction (Samauda, Kong, Cummins, Pascual-Leone, Lewis, 1991).

This type of comprehensive assessment is becoming more commonplace when servicing ESL populations in public schools. Known as sociocultural assessment—also termed comprehensive assessment or dynamic assessment—the perspective assumes that children learn language in real-life situations that depend on social interactions and that second language learners display different knowledge and use of language depending on the situation and social context (Stefanakis, 1998). Snow (1992) supports this view by stating, "critical insights of the sociocultural perspective must be introduced if educators

are to have adequate assessment of bilingual individuals." The sociocultural assessment perspective makes three assumptions:

1. Bilingualism is a potential cognitive asset that can enhance learning.
2. Sociocultural factors—political, social, cultural, and linguistic—can affect language learning, and context is the key to understanding language output in classroom situations.
3. Language proficiency and related learning abilities should be assessed in context and over time (Baca & Almanza, 1991, Damico, 1991; Hakuta & Garcia, 1989; Snow, 1992).

Assessments conducted in both English and the student's native language in addition to using a combination of standardized and qualitative information will produce the most reliable and valid information. Information generated by the sociocultural process assist teachers in compiling a comprehensive profile of students. In contrast to a single score from a static standardized test, sociocultural data may include a wide range of sources such as observational data, school records, home documents, language dominance information, educational assessment data, sensorimotor and/or developmental data, adaptive behavioral data, medical records, personality assessments, and intellectual assessments (Samuda, et. al., 1991).

Figure 1 illustrates this process. "The Quad," developed by Anthony (1991), offers teachers a guide for knowing where to look to collect data needed when assessing students in a sociocultural manner. Routman (1991) notes that the lower two halves consist of traditional means of assessment—considered summative—while the top two halves are more formative. The formative means offer a more dynamic approach because

they are ongoing and can be revised; redefined, and revisited with the end result being a timeline of cumulative growth.

<p>Observation of Process</p> <p>Students immersed in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reading Writing Speaking Listening 	<p>Observation of Product</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning logs Reading logs Selected pages from notebooks and journals Audio tapes Writing folders Group work logs Projects
<p>Classroom Measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Text-related activities Teacher-made tests Comprehension questions Homework 	<p>Decontextualized Measures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Criterion-referenced tests District exams State exams

Figure 1. "The Quad" developed by Anthony (1991) as a guide for collecting multiple forms of data to be used when assessing students.

Creating a Sociocultural Data-Driven ESL Classroom Environment

In order to begin developing a sociocultural assessment framework, ESL teachers must consider several principles of assessment. Harp (1994) suggests that these principles include:

1. Assessment and evaluation is first and foremost for the individual learner,
2. Assessment and evaluation strategies must honor the wholeness of any language,

3. Reading and writing are viewed as processes,
4. Teacher intuition is a valuable assessment and evaluation tool,
5. Teacher observation is at the center of assessment and evaluation, and
6. Assessment and evaluation must reflect what teachers know about student prior knowledge, text structure, metacognition and reading strategies, student interests, and attitudes towards the learning process.

Within the sociocultural assessment framework, teachers must view themselves as data collectors and analyzers as well as assessors of student learning. In order to become data-savvy, the ESL teacher must be able to: a) identify questions related to student performance, b) identify data and gather necessary information taking into account demographic information, c) examine and use data, and d) ask useful and information-rich questions. In other words, teachers collect and analyze a variety of data then use the data as evidence of learning intention, engagement, and artifact with regard to language, content, interaction, and behavior. Table 2 provides an overview of the multiple sources for collecting data in order to develop a comprehensive picture of the ESL learner. In addition, ESL teacher-assessors must keep in mind the perceptions, cultural backgrounds, and development of their students as they interact and create within the classroom environment (King, 1994; Noyce, Perda, and Traver, 2000).

Furthermore, valuable data for assessment purposes can be gleaned from reader profiles, oral performances, presentations, and any other written products. When collecting data from multiple sources, ESL teachers should keep in mind that any type of meaningful assessment data must following the following criteria:

1. focus is on determining individual growth over time, rather than comparing students with one another,
2. emphasis is on students' strengths rather than weaknesses, and
3. consideration is given to the learning styles, language proficiencies, cultural and educational backgrounds of students (Tannenbaum, 1996).

The process of moving from a psychometric-only assessment framework to a sociocultural assessment framework can be overwhelming considering the lack of available materials, preparation, and training opportunities afforded to the typical ESL teacher. Although there is no one single formula for sociocultural assessment, teachers—both ESL and regular education—must understand how a child learns in the cultural and social context of naturally-occurring classroom situations. Figure 2—adapted from the Sociocultural Assessment Process model developed by Stefanakis (1999) provides a beginning point.

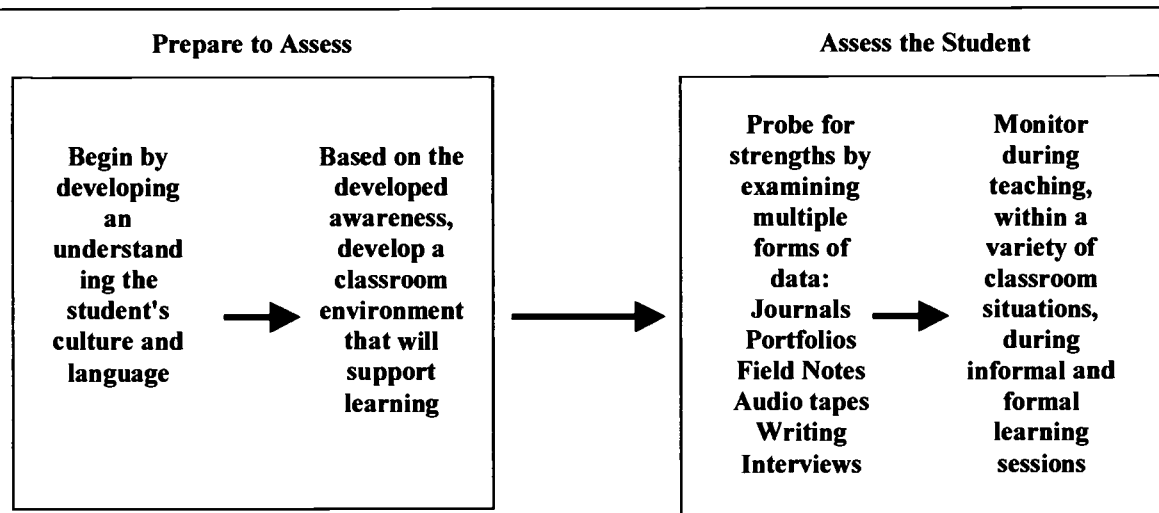


Figure 2. Sociocultural Assessment Process – adapted from Stefanakis (1999).

Putting the Process into Practice

The following suggestions and sociocultural assessment guidelines are offered in order to assist teachers of non-English students in developing into teacher-assessors and directors of data-driven classroom environments. Guidelines for engaging in sociocultural assessment are divided up into the following three stages:

1. Stage One/Data to Assist With Understanding Issues of Language and Culture - Assessment for Initial Placement
2. Stage Two/Data to Assist in Creating a Classroom Environment and Appropriate Learning Tasks for the ESL Learner – Assessment for Monitoring Progress and Making Adjustments
3. Stage Three/Additional Data for Student Profile - Assessment for Exiting Programs and Receiving Consultative Services.

In order to assist ESL and regular education teachers in the assessment process, Table 1 provides an illustrative organizer for classroom use.

Moving Toward Dynamic Assessment for ESL Learners

Although the process of sociocultural assessment is time consuming, data-heavy, and broad in scope, it is a sound educational means of providing a comprehensive picture of unique individuals with unique needs. The process provides educators—both ESL and regular classroom teachers—with an intricate picture of their students as well as a portrait of their culture, language, customs, interests, and backgrounds. The eclectic "cultural landscape" that sociocultural assessment provides is a valuable source that can be utilized in developing and designing the best possible programs for ESL students. As ESL programs continue to grow in order to meet the needs of a rapidly growing linguistically-

diverse student population, employing sociocultural assessment procedures may be one of the paths teachers can proactively take to fill the "service gaps" that now exist and that must be corrected. In the words of Carlos Casteneda:

Look at every path closely and deliberately.
Try it as many times as you think necessary...
Ask yourself – Does this path have a heart?
If it does, the path is good. If it doesn't, it is of no use.

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